

My Favourite Brassicas

by Pam McCready

At our January round table meeting there was some discussion about various problems growing Brussels sprouts and cauliflower and I thought it would be interesting to do a little research on these two vegetables. We had grown Brussels sprouts in England without too many problems, but cauliflowers were definitely a little trickier.

According to *West Coast Seeds*, sprouts are one of the easiest brassicas to grow, but there are a few important points to remember. The best time to harvest them is after the first couple of frosts. The cold causes the plants to create sugar – their antifreeze! This gives the sprouts a sweet and mild flavour. One of the reasons why sprouts have not been the most popular vegetable is that they are often picked too soon and are frequently over-cooked. Cutting a cross incision into the base of the sprouts before cooking ensures that they are quickly cooked evenly through to the middle and only need to boil or steam for 2 to 3 minutes, depending on the size, and will remain a bright green colour – no more soggy, overcooked, pallid looking and bitter tasting sprouts! Sprouts are full of beta-carotene, vitamin C and fibre. They are also delicious roasted.

The sources I consulted recommended starting the seeds anywhere from late-May to early/mid-June. Linda Gilkeson (*Year-Round Harvest: Winter Gardening on the Coast*) feels that if the sprouts are planted in the early spring, they may be over mature by the time of the first frost. Essentially, they are cool season plants that thrive in full sun in temperatures between 60 to 65°F. They can be transplanted into the garden in mid-August, 2 feet apart, into rich, well-drained soil amended with composted manure, with the addition of a handful of a complete organic fertilizer into the soil beneath each transplant. High nitrogen levels can result in loose sprouts, so one should not fertilize again. Set the transplants firmly in the ground deeper than they grew. The plants should be kept moist and well mulched in the heat of summer. By late September they should just be beginning to form sprouts. Cool temperatures during sprout development are needed for the production of compact sprouts. By mid-October, (a month before harvesting) pinch out the growing tip. This will give greater yields, as the plant will divert its energy from leaf growth to sprout development. After a few frosts, pick off the largest sprouts from the bottom, leaving the littler ones to continue growing. Removing the yellow leaves as they fade gives the sprouts room to grow.



Other tips that I learned were a) avoid planting sprouts in soil that has had other brassicas in it within the last two years; b) Brussels sprouts have a very shallow root system, therefore weed by hand so as not to damage the roots (Linda Gilkeson suggests staking the plants); c) they need plenty of water, but good drainage, and lighter soils will need more water; d) after harvesting, if you leave them in the ground, the plants will send up long edible flower stalks which are tender and sweet when steamed, or they can be eaten raw with a dip.

The cauliflower is a much more finicky plant to grow. It is a cool season crop, a descendant of the common cabbage and does not tolerate heat or cold very well, preferring temperatures in the 60s F. It needs a lot of space, at least six hours of sunshine and deep soil rich in organic matter, slightly acid to neutral, pH 6.5 - 6.8. *The Farmers' Almanac* does not recommend them for the beginner gardener and suggests starting from transplants rather than from seeds. Plant 18 inches to 24 inches apart with 30 inches between rows in soil that has been amended with well



composted manure and general purpose organic fertilizer. *The Royal Horticultural Society* recommends firming the soil by treading before planting. Water the plants well before transplanting. Make a hole big enough to hold the plant, with the lowest leaf at ground level. Fill this hole repeatedly with water. This will ensure that the plant is sitting in a large area of moist soil. Firm the soil very well against the roots.

Cauliflowers need uninterrupted growth with consistent moisture and moderate temperatures. If their growth is checked at any time through stress during the growing period, they are likely to produce premature, small, deformed heads instead of a single white head (buttoning), or the forming edible part may be ruined. Fertile soil holds water and adding mulch can also conserve moisture. Whether you plant for a spring or fall crop, you have to be prepared to protect from frost and shade from heat. They are considered a good fall crop in many regions and should be planted about the same time as fall cabbage – 6 to 8 weeks before the first frost, but after the day time temperature is below 75°F. If you are growing from seed, start the seeds 4 to 5 weeks before the plants are needed.

When the curd (white head) is about 2 inches to 3 inches in diameter, tie the outer leaves together over the head with tape, twine or a rubber band. This process is called blanching. It protects the curd from the sun and you get the pretty white colour. The plants are usually ready 7 to 12 days after blanching. Linda Gilkeson recommends cauliflowers as a winter crop, because there are a few cultivars that are frost hardy and don't form heads until late winter and early spring. The cold weather does not cause buttoning and they continue to grow in the spring to a good size. She describes the quality of the heads as 'superb' and adds "I have found that even when most of the leaves are broken off of the plants by winter storms, the plants grow new leaves in early spring and go on to produce good sized heads."

Recommended winter cultivars: Galleon – large white heads in April to May; Aalsmeer – somewhat smaller. Purple Cape cauliflower has large purple heads, late February to the middle of March.

I think they will be something I might try next year!

